

Kids of the Real Upside-Down by The Stephanois (orphan_account)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

"I'm sorry," Barb says, backing up a step and raising her hands. "There's some creepy kidnapper wandering around the woods, and you want to go *look* for him?"

"He might have Tommy and Carol," Steve says.

Barb stares. "And?"

Steve puts his hands on his hips. "So it's the right thing to do."

"Is it, though?"

FYI: THIS FIC IS NOT CURRENTLY BEING UPDATED. I HOPE TO CHANGE THAT SOMEDAY, BUT *SHRUGS*

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Happy Stranger Things Eve! To celebrate, I'm starting a chaptered story that is might immediately get messed up by Season 2 characterization, woo hoo!

All the gratitude to [PeoplePeel](#), who dealt with a sudden deluge of messages from me about this all day yesterday and then read it over for me before posting. <3

Steve kicks off from the wall and looks around the hallway. What the hell.

“I really thought they'd be here. Tommy never misses a game against Lafayette.”

(Probably because his half-brother goes to Lafayette and Tommy's got, like, massive unresolved issues about the whole thing where his father had a secret second family for most of his life. Not that he and Steve ever talk about it, because that would be weird.)

“Maybe they're sick,” Nancy says. She is trying valiantly to look like she actually cares about the whereabouts of Tommy and Carol, which he appreciates.

“Maybe they've decided to do everyone a favor and skip town,” Barb says. She is *not* trying to look like she cares, not at all.

Steve doesn't even know why she's here, only that Nancy had gotten this weird desperate gleam in her eyes when Barb tried to duck out of going to the game.

Nancy gives Barb a meaningful look, and Barb sighs before offering, “Or maybe their herpes acted up at the same time?”

If Tommy and Carol were present and not maybe-missing-like-that-Byers-kid-was-missing, Steve would probably find that kinda funny. As it is, he just shakes his head and slumps back against the wall.

After a moment he says, “I guess we should just head on into the game.”

“Uh – ” Barb looks quickly at Nancy, who looks uneasily back. And okay, Steve's not a complete moron, he gets they don't want to watch the game. But damn if he isn't going to play dumb right into making them come with. Call it payback for the herpes comment.

It's not like he can go to the game *alone*.

“Um – Harrington, hey,” a new voice says.

They all look over to find Jonathan Byers, of all people, standing in the middle of the otherwise empty hallway. He is clutching a large envelope and looking like he hates his life even more than usual, which is saying something.

“Yes...?” Steve asks, drawing the word out. He tries to remember if he's ever spoken directly to Jonathan before. Or, for that matter, if Jonathan's ever spoken to him.

(He doesn't count that one time in the eighth grade when there weren't enough girls in gym class and the teacher forced them to learn ballroom dancing together. He hadn't hit his growth spurt yet, so he kept noticing Jonathan's stupid shoulders and wondering why his stupid hands were rougher than his own and anyway, it was a terrible time in his life, a time never to be spoken of, or even remembered, gee thanks for bringing up traumatic memories, *Jonathan*.)

“Steve, what the hell is wrong with you?” Nancy whispers at him. “His brother is *missing*.”

Steve realizes he's kind of glaring at the other boy and tries to rein it back in. To be fair, though, Jonathan's giving back as good as he gets.

“What's up, man?” he tries again.

Jonathan glances between the three of them, eyes lingering a little on Nancy. For a moment he waves the envelope in the air jerkily, like he's thinking about throwing it at Steve and making a break for it, but in the end he just says, “There's – something you should see. I

wanted to ask you about it.”

Steve is so not in the mood for a mystery to deepen. He puts his hands on his hips and sighs. “Fine. But I have one condition.”

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“I can't believe I'm here,” Barb mutters, tugging her coat away from the puddle of unidentified-but-sticky-looking liquid that decorates the bleachers next to her. “Nancy, you know part of the reason I quit band was so I wouldn't have to go to games.”

Steve glances over at the pep band section across the court; he's never noticed before, but there is a distinct lack of pep in a lot of the kids holding instruments.

Nancy isn't listening to her friend – she's too busy pretending she isn't covertly watching Jonathan with poorly-disguised curiosity. Steve reminds himself that he's a totally secure kind of guy who doesn't get paranoid about his girlfriend being attracted to other guys (but *shoulders*, an insane voice whispers in his head).

Meanwhile, Jonathan is staring very hard at the court like he doesn't know what basketball is or how he ended up in this situation.

Whenever Steve pictured belonging to a motley crew, he'd always assumed it would be a lot more fun.

“All right,” he says to Jonathan over the band's meandering rendition of *Louie, Louie*. “What did you want to show me?”

Please don't be something weird, please don't be something weird.

Jonathan startles out of his emo trance and glances at him. He hesitates before undoing the clasp on the envelope and pulling out several photos.

He hands them to Steve, who doesn't understand what he's looking at for a few seconds. When he does, he shoots to his feet and shouts, loud enough to startle a nearby dad into losing his grip on his popcorn, “What the *hell*?”

“Steve, what – ” Nancy tugs the photos from his hand and flips quickly through them. Barb looks over her shoulder with bright-eyed interest, her eyebrows rising a few millimeters with every new picture.

“Okay, well. That's.” Barb says. She looks keenly at Jonathan. “Were you hoping to get some peeping tom pictures?”

“No!” Jonathan snaps. “I wouldn't do that – I was looking for Will.”

“And what, you thought he might be in my backyard?” Steve demands.

Nancy tugs him back down next to her and says, “Stop yelling, people are starting to stare.”

It's true; kids and parents alike were looking over. Steve manfully doesn't punch Jonathan, because even if no one likes the guy, they'd probably take issue with him being attacked during this sensitive time for his family or whatever.

Jonathan passes a hand over his eyes, like he's the one who is suffering here, and says, “Just look at the photos again – the ones after you guys went inside and it's just Tommy and Carol in the pool.”

Nancy flips to the right photo, and Steve and Barb crane their necks to look at it again. Then, as one, the three of them start to tilt their heads.

Steve frowns. “What is that?”

“Lens flare,” Barb supplies. “Or some – reflection from the water?”

“That's no lens flare,” Jonathan says grimly.

Nancy is still staring down at the glossy photo. “It looks like some kind of ...monster.”

“Why the hell didn't you warn us?” Steve asks him, accusing. “Maybe take a break from your stalking to go, 'Hey guys, I thought you should know, there's *another* creeper hanging around!’”

He flushes and grits out, "I didn't see anything last night. I only noticed when I developed the photos this afternoon. Wasn't going to say anything, but I noticed your friends weren't around." He shrugs tensely. "Thought you should know."

I'd want to know hangs unsaid in the air. Steve feels an unwelcome twinge of pity, but he shakes it off. No time for that.

That's his backyard in the photo. No way he's going to be able to sleep with the thought of that figure hanging around below his window.

"All right, we're leaving," he announces, standing up again. The others look up at him in surprise but start to scramble eagerly to their feet.

They wade past irritated spectators and make for the gym doors. Before going through, Steve cranes one last regretful look back at the scoreboard. Lafayette was up by almost twenty points; if Tommy wasn't dead, he might wish he was.

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"We need to go check out the woods behind my house," Steve says once they're in the parking lot.

Jonathan looks almost nauseous about it, but he nods in agreement. "My brother was in those woods when he disappeared," he says, which Steve didn't know. Great. They're going to go hike through the murder woods.

"I'm sorry," Barb says, backing up a step and raising her hands. "There's some creepy kidnapper wandering around the woods, and you want to go *look* for him?"

"He might have Tommy and Carol," Steve says.

Barb stares. "And?"

Steve puts his hands on his hips. "So it's the right thing to do."

"Is it, though?"

Nancy nudges her. "Barb, come on."

"You're coming, right, Nancy?" Steve asks.

Her eyes go wide. After a second she starts to gesture and says, "I would, but my mother, she's making me do this – thing with her."

It's a painfully obvious lie, which he isn't thrilled about, but he finds he can't really blame her. Tommy and Carol aren't her friends; they're not her responsibility.

Resolutely ignoring the presence of hangers-on, Steve draws her close. She shuffles into it, apprehension and awkwardness hovering at the edges of her expression.

"It's okay," he says, rubbing a little at her shoulders. "I don't think I want my girlfriend out there with the creepy kidnapper in the woods anyway."

"*Girlfriend?*" Nancy says, jerking backward a little in the circle of his arms. She stares up at him. "Who said you were my boyfriend?"

"Well, I just assumed," he says slowly, a little puzzled because she's usually a lot quicker on the uptake than this. Nancy Wheeler has a great memory, which he knows because he did that flashcard thing with her, which – hey, speaking of – "I mean, I helped you *study*. For a class I don't even have."

Please don't let her think that's what friends with benefits means, he thinks with sudden panic. Nancy's kind of a nerd, and for whatever reason he woke up one day a month ago and was suddenly *really into that*, but some things go too far.

Tommy would never let him hear the end of it, for one.

"And you called me an idiot," he says. "I thought you were flirting — wait. Do you really think I'm an idiot?"

They stare at each other. He starts to drop his arms, but she grabs up his hands before they can slip away entirely. He looks down at her expectantly, but she seems to stall out there, trapped between not wanting to let him go but unable to say anything to keep him.

“This is making me really uncomfortable,” he hears Barb say to Jonathan, reminding him that not only does his not-girlfriend's best friend hate him, but also Jonathan was here to witness that whole conversation. Great.

“Look – I'll call you later,” Nancy says, squeezing his hands. “Check up on how things went. Okay?”

“Sure,” he says after a second. “Sounds like a plan.”

It's amazing how a day can turn out. You wake up thinking you have a new girlfriend and a game to watch with your friends; then, next thing you know, it's halftime and you're leaving to go walk around in the mud with Jonathan-freaking-Byers.

2. Chapter 2

Be cool, is what Steve tells himself as he leads Jonathan's sad Ford LTD back to his house. *This doesn't have to be a big deal. You look for any sign of Tommy or Carol or a crazed kidnapper, you keep the small talk to a minimum, he leaves quickly. Easy.*

Jonathan parks his car behind Tommy's abandoned Suburban, and Steve pulls ahead into the driveway. He mistimes fiddling with his wallet and keys before getting out of his car and then has to stand there waiting for the other boy to walk up.

They look at each other for a moment, silent and unenthused.

Well, Steve is unenthused. Jonathan, he'll allow, might be more absorbed by the whole missing little brother thing.

He jerks his head to the gate off to the side of the drive. "Pool's around the back. We'll check that and go from there."

The pool looks much the same as it did the night before, i.e. he really needs to pick up the cigarette butts and empty beer cans before his parents get home. Jonathan makes a methodical circuit of the pool twice before looking over to where Steve stands by a lounge.

"Well? Does anything look out of place?" he asks.

Steve glances around and shrugs. When the other boy just gives him an impatient look, he says, "Hey, you were here last night too. You tell me: do the digs look as good up close, or do you prefer the wide-angle lens?"

Jonathan's face tightens and he looks away. Then he blinks and points down at the cement a few feet away. "What's that?"

Steve follows the line of his finger. He squats down and peers at the small patch of rusty brown staining the cement. It takes him a moment to remember.

"Oh, uh – Nancy's friend – "

“Barb,” Jonathan says, because he probably just can't help himself.

Be cool.

Steve smiles tightly and gets back to his feet. “Right, Barb. She cut her hand trying to shotgun a beer.”

“Barb Holland tried to shotgun a beer,” Jonathan says, flatly disbelieving. “Wow. You just bring out the best in everyone, don't you?”

He stares at him. “What's your problem?”

“Nothing – nothing, sorry.” Jonathan shakes his head, looking almost annoyed with himself. He takes a careful breath and gestures. “So – what happened after that?”

Steve watches him suspiciously for another second before saying slowly, “Nothing. I went inside with Nancy and her – Barb. Showed them where the first aid kit is. Then they left.” He's proud of himself for not resenting Barb the Buzzkill more, really. “And when I came back out here, Tommy and Carol were gone.”

It was generally, he reflects, a real letdown of a night.

Jonathan says, “They didn't take Tommy's vehicle. So I guess we should start checking the woods.”

Steve looks over his shoulder at the trees. He's grown up with the view, but suddenly they look alien. Unwelcoming. “You were in there last night, what do you think we're going to find that you didn't come across then?”

Jonathan gives him a look. “It was dark and there were a pack of idiots screaming in the distance – not the best conditions for observation.”

Be cool.

Steve grits his teeth and gestures: *after you*. He only narrowly avoids whipping one of the empty beer cans at his head once he's turned.

—

“Maybe there's no connection.” Steve steps over a fallen tree trunk and says optimistically, “They probably just got drunk and stumbled home. And were too hungover to come to school today.” Or to pick up Tommy's Suburban; or to answer the phone.

Jonathan doesn't even look over. “You're telling me the two of them don't usually drive home after drinking here?”

Steve deflates.

Everything is worse in the woods; the trees make walking with any sense of direction impossible and all the dead leaves rustle like a faulty alarm system. Steve's attention is torn between paranoid watchfulness and intense irritation with the boy walking in front of him.

Case in point:

Jonathan says abruptly, “Well, we know one thing for sure: if there is a kidnapper, he's opportunistic.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he doesn't have a — a *type*. Will's a smart, sweet kid. Your friends — ” He glances back at him, a slanting dismissal of his entire character.

He says defensively, “They're not that bad.”

“I once saw Carol steal a couple bucks out of Stacey Baldwin's cancer fund box at the Fair Mart,” Jonathan says distantly. “She used them to buy cigarettes and Fritos.”

Steve's not wincing; it's just the wind.

“Tommy saw that I saw,” he continues, nudging aside a branch, “and threatened to slash my tires if I told anyone.”

If the crazed kidnapper wanted to show up right now, Steve would be okay with that.

“Anyway, that's who you're friends with – but I don't know why I'm bothering telling you any of this. It's not like you don't know or aren't just like them.”

Jonathan lets the branch whip backwards towards Steve's face, but he dodges it like a ninja. He narrows his eyes at the back of the other boy's head.

“Hey! I put my change in the cancer box every time I buy a pop.” Steve pauses. That had sounded much less pathetic in his head. “And I don't think that was a cool thing to do, okay, not cool at all.”

He doesn't know why he's bothering defending himself to Jonathan. It's not like he'll change his mind or stop being stuck up.

Now, Nancy? *She* would deserve an explanation.

The only problem is she hasn't asked for one, and he suddenly has to wonder if that's because she thinks the same as Jonathan. Maybe she doesn't think of him as boyfriend material, just a really hot fling with questionable taste in friends and backyard security.

(And maybe it's for the best that she hasn't asked for an explanation, he thinks quietly, because he doesn't really have one other than he's been friends with Tommy since they were in kindergarten. And that's practically a contractual obligation right there; you used to eat glue with a guy, you look for him when he goes missing, you know?)

Ahead of him, Jonathan snorts. Steve finally loses his temper and grabs the other boy by the arm to yank him around.

“You know, I don't know what your deal is – ”

“Are you *serious*?” Jonathan says, disbelieving. He tugs on his arm and Steve lets go of him, adds a light shove for good measure.

“I'm out here, same as you, trying to figure out what the hell is going on.”

His face twists. “Don't even try to pretend what you're feeling right now compares to what my mom and me are going through.”

"I'm *not*, *Jesus*." Steve shoves his hands through his hair in frustration. "But I'm here, okay, and you could make this all a lot easier if you'd just stop being such a *jumped up little* – "

"Look you arrogant *prick* – "

A branch snaps like a bone breaking and they both jump and spin around.

Steve stares around frantically, but it's just dead leaves and underbrush all around. "Did you see that?"

Jonathan shakes his head and licks his lips. "There was – I thought? No. Just a flash of – something."

"You mean someone?" Steve asks. And Jonathan, who should apparently never be trusted to reassure anyone, fucking *hesitates*.

"Yeah, *no*," Steve says. "I'm getting out of here."

He starts walking quickly back in the direction of his house. But after a moment, he realizes there isn't any noise behind him. He looks back to see Jonathan standing still, staring bleakly around the kidnapping hotspot. He looks more miserable than scared, and Steve should probably just leave him to his brooding – but.

Steve swears under his breath and walks over to him. He gets only a startled flash of dark eyes before he's grabbing his arm and hauling him back with him to the house.

To his surprise, the other boy doesn't resist. Steve still keeps a grip on him anyway; call him paranoid, but he doesn't trust the weird bastard not to do something crazy.